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China/Scotland Project

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Detail : 'Magnetic Chongming' Graeme Todd 2012

Ref 2014 The China / Scotland Project

A three year international research project between Graeme Todd, Polarcap; Rania Ho, Arrow Factory, Beijing; Wang Xaida, James Cohan Gallery, Shanghai and Jonathan Owen, Edinburgh, involving a three phase project to develop understanding and dialogue and foster project developments in contemporary visual art between Scotland and China.

Artists questions and responses based on first hand research observations are part of an important dialogue that enables us to understand and respond to our shared situation: from global to local and back again.

Ref 2014 China/Scotland Project

Phase One : The Consortium

In 2009 I was invited, as an artist and a director of Polarcap (contemporary art projects) by the Scottish Arts Council to take part in a scoping visit to Beijing and Shanghai. The purpose of this visit was to develop and further, long-lasting strategies and research possibilities between Scottish and Chinese visual artists and arts organisations. The delegation had individual representatives from *Glasgow Sculpture Workshop*, *Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop*, *Collective Gallery*, *Generator*, *Fife Contemporary Arts & Crafts*, *Scottish Sculpture Workshop* and *Scottish Arts Council*. The visit was hosted by Simon Kirby, *Victoria Miro Gallery, Beijing* who developed a programme that ensured an avoidance of the 'guided tour syndrome' experienced by so many previous delegations. This programme enabled us to meet artists and curators with whom there was a possible synergy. I personally was interested in meeting artists and curators who were working at grass roots level, who eschewed the prevalent tendency towards market driven, high production value outputs that were typical of China's new embracing of the global market based economy. They were, instead, working away from this tendency and producing work that was more human in scale and that was critical, innovative, original and experimental.

On our return to Scotland we drew upon our collective experiences in China and nominated representatives from three organisations. We identified these contacts as representing a cross section of who we considered to be viable for building relations with Scottish equivalents: Rania Ho from the *Arrow Factory, Beijing*, a collective who use a shop front in a typical Huton street in North Beijing to stage a programme of international artists working across variety of media; Megan Connolly of *Chart International* who work primarily with developing community based projects in Beijing and Nataline Colonnello of *Galerie Urs Meile*, an international gallery also based in Beijing and Lucerne, the first gallery to champion the work of *Ai Weiwei*.

As part of their itinerary they visited our studios and project space at West Barns Arts where we introduced them to our projects and working practices. At this time we decided to work with *Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop* and *Fife Contemporary Arts & Crafts* to form a working partnership and to propose a project to Creative Scotland called Steep Trail that addresses the legacy of *John Muir (1838-1914)* and his relevance to contemporary Scottish, Chinese and global culture.

This project would prove to be an important component of my own China/ Scotland Project.



Arrow Factory, Beijing
Just Around the Corner, Ken Lum 2009



Blank Frank, 2010 Collection Viren Doshi

Graeme Todd's solo exhibition 'Blank Frank', Mummery + Schnelle, London 2010

The direct research input from the initial consortium visit to China, enabled me to further develop my interest in and influence from Chinese and Japanese art, to produce a show in London at Mummery + Schnelle called Blank Frank that mixed an influence from German Kosmiche music, European modernism with the formal aspects of form and void that are characteristic of the oriental approach to landscape and nature. The use of organic material in the form of poppy seeds was a new feature of the work in the show that stemmed from the visit to China.

"The stains of scattered poppy seeds litter Todd's logbook of half forgotten, deep frozen, opium tinged dreams, communicating an idea of space rather than being a literal representation of it." Andrew Mummery, Gallery Director

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Phase Two: 2012 The international exchange residencies

I was selected by the partners in Steep Trail Project and Creative Scotland to be one of the Scottish artists that would spend one month in China during the autumn of 2012 along with the Scottish artist Jonathan Owen. The purpose of the residency is part Steep Trail and also, in a broader sense, Polarcap's China/Scotland project to further research and build upon contacts made on the initial visits. The Scottish residency in China was coordinated by Lui Mei, director of 140sqm Gallery in Shanghai who I met in 2009 and Xing Zhao, associate director of James Cohan Gallery, Shanghai.

As part of the Steep Trail project we visited the site of the proposed eco city Dongtan. The city was intended to be the "model for how to build sustainable cities worldwide" but due to the global economic downturn was never realised. Now the "worlds biggest gap site" this wetland in the mouth of the Yangtze river remains an enigma and reminiscent of science fiction; a failed colonisation with a token existence as a visitor centre and is little discussed now in China.

The China Scotland project enabled me to form lasting and in depth relations with artists, curators and galleries in China; principally in Shanghai and Beijing. Visits to the studio's of Wang Xieda, Chen Hangfen, Rania Ho and Wang Wei, discussions with gallerist and art consultant Lui Mei of 140sqm gallery, Shanghai, gallerist Arthur Solway of James Cohan Gallery, Shanghai and Megan and KC Connolly of Chart Contemporary, Beijing. Professional presentations with Jonathan Owen to this group ensured that active connection making and knowledge transfers were made and exist in a tangible way that can be built on in the future. Contacts were also re-affirmed with Simon Kirby and cultural differences were explored. It was interesting to see the progression and rate of change of everything in China and how artists struggle to maintain a position of cultural relevance in reconciling the country's vast historical heritage and it's recent hand over fist willingness to trade at breakneck pace.

This tension between the past and the present has been a factor in my work and the continuity of thought that provides long term human understanding of what is contemporary and this is something that I am bringing more to the front in current works.

Today, Modern China's rapid growth has global implications and the physical reality of contemporary Shanghai is remarkable – a 21st century equivalent to New York's position in the early 20th century, heralding the ascendance of a new and dynamic presence in the world. Although obviously very different Scotland and China both display evidence of how global economic upheavals can affect the urban and natural environment.



Wang Xieda's Studio near Shanghai 2012



Visitors Centre, Dongtan, site of planned eco city on Chongming Island, off Shanghai 2012

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Phase 3: Exhibitions 2009-2013

Over the period of time covered by the China/Scotland Project I have been involved in exhibitions that have represented nodal points on the journey that is related to the research activities of the project.

An ongoing development and negotiation is evident in the progression of works. The research questions raised by the key participants have influenced the development of work produced over 2009-12. It is anticipated this will gain emphasis when the four artists exhibit together as part of at the Steep Trail touring exhibition to St Andrews Museum, Edinburgh Sculpture Works and West Barns Studios, East Lothian

Solo Exhibitions during this period are:

Graeme Todd presented by Laure Genillard Gallery at Guestroom Brussels in 2009 ,
Blank Frank at Mummery + Schnelle, London in 2010,
Guestroom Brussels 2011
Galerie Brigitte Weiss in Zurich 2013.

Group shows have included A Parliament of Lines at City Art Centre in Edinburgh 2012 which is a touring show going to the Pier Arts Centre Orkney and RMIT Gallery, Melbourne, Australia.

All of these shows bear indication of the development of my continuing confluence of a northern European and central Asian vision of landscape and nature, weighed against the contemporary shift towards a homogeneous global economy and these research questions have a defining influence on my academic and professional concerns.



River Flowers Part of a print edition commissioned by Edinburgh Printmakers 2009



View of Shanghai Photograph Graeme Todd 2009